

Written evidence submitted by Common Sense Media

[Common Sense Media](#) is an independent nonprofit organisation dedicated to helping children thrive in a rapidly changing world. The organisation is based in San Francisco with regional offices across the U.S.

We launched our first international office in the UK in 2019, a registered charity (also Common Sense Media, registered charity 1188840), through which we rate, educate, investigate, and advocate for the well-being, safety, and privacy of children in the UK and EU. Our research and free resources provide parents, teachers, and policymakers with reliable, independent data on children's use of media and technology and the impact it has on their physical, emotional, social, and intellectual development.

Common Sense Media achieves its aim to create a more healthy, equitable, and empowering future for children in the following ways:

- **RATE:** Through our parent platform, Common Sense Media, we provide independent ratings and reviews of various forms of media.
- **EDUCATE:** Through Common Sense Education, we share our Digital Citizenship curriculum with millions of teachers across the world to increase media literacy and shape digital citizens, as well as offer tips to families and communities as they navigate media and technology.
- **ADVOCATE:** We advocate and raise awareness to drive policy and industry changes that protect the safety, wellbeing, and privacy of children in the digital world, including the UK, EU, and USA.
- **INVESTIGATE:** Our team conducts independent research about children's use of media and technology and its impact on their development.

We are greatly encouraged by The Education Committee's commitment to understanding how screen time can support and impact children's development, wellbeing, and educational outcomes. Thank you for this opportunity to respond to this consultation.

Common Sense Media was best equipped to submit responses to the following questions, which leverage our organisation's research, policy expertise, and evidence around screen time and the impact on children's development, wellbeing and emotional outcomes.

- **What is the current understanding of how screen time can support or impact children's wellbeing and mental health, including the use of social media?**

Smartphones have become a constant companion in our teens' lives. From connection with family and friends to entertainment and literal white noise, young people rely on their smartphones for different types of support, relaxation, and distraction—at home and at school, and during the day and night.

The good news is that many young people have grown savvier about how their phones try to draw them in, and they're taking steps to protect their digital well-being. But the business model of these

apps and devices depends on users picking up their phones and engaging with them as much as possible, and it's clear that young people are struggling to set boundaries. Helping kids develop digital well-being requires support from parents, educators, and the tech industry itself.

We would like to highlight our latest research, [Constant Companion: A Week in the Life of a Young Person's Smartphone Use \(2023\)](#)

Our research aimed to address the following questions:

- How much time are preadolescents and adolescents spending on their smartphones?
- Which types of apps do they use most frequently and for the longest periods of time, and why?
- Are they accessing apps intended for older audiences?
- How many notifications are they receiving per day, and from which apps?
- How much smartphone use occurs during school hours, and why?
- How much smartphone use occurs at night, and why?
- How much tension or frustration are preadolescents and adolescents experiencing about their smartphones, and how do they manage this?
- Are there new insights about youth experiences and practices with smartphones that could lead to better design to improve young people's well-being?

Our key findings:

- Teens are fielding a barrage of notifications from the apps on their phones. On a typical day, participants received a median of 237 notifications. Of those, about a quarter arrived during the school day, and 5% at night.
- Smartphones both help and hurt sleep. Over half of participants used their phones on school nights, often to listen to music to wind down or get to sleep. But sometimes their days are so busy that they only get to relax with their phone at bedtime, and that pushes sleep later.

Published in 2022, our research report [The Common Sense Census: Media Use by Tweens and Teens, 2021](#), was our first opportunity to see childrens' media use during the pandemic and compare the numbers to previous years. And we learned that in the US, media use has grown faster since the start of the pandemic -- over a two-year period -- than it has over the four years prior to the pandemic. But this report goes a few steps further by exploring the content behind those numbers: how kids are spending that time, and which media activities they enjoy most.

In addition to our research considering the amount of screen media use and type of use, we have also recently published a report considering the impact social media platforms and their features may have on adolescent girls' mental health. The report, [Teens and Mental Health: How Girls Really Feel About Social Media](#), published in March 2023, asks girls to share their experiences on social media platforms including positive and negative perceptions of specific features that appear across platforms (e.g., location sharing, comments, filters).

The report found that perceptions of the effects of social media platforms were generally mixed. Girls were most likely to say that location sharing (45%) and public accounts (33%) have had a mostly negative effect on them compared to other features. In contrast, they were most likely to say that video recommendations (49%) and private messaging (45%) had a mostly positive impact on them.

The study included a measure of depressive symptomatology and results found that girls who reported symptoms of depression were more likely to say that social media apps had a negative impact on people their age. However, these girls were also more likely to say that their lives would be worse without some of these platforms, suggesting that social media platforms play a significant role, whether positive or negative, in the lives of adolescent girls with depressive symptoms. Similarly, the study also found that girls who are struggling socially offline (i.e. reported daily experiences of bullying, drama, or feeling left out in their in-person lives) are three to four times as likely as other girls to report daily negative social experiences online, but they are also more likely to reap the benefits of the digital world.

- **How can schools and parents be better supported to manage children’s screen usage, for example, through age-related guidance? Could the Department for Education be doing more in this area?**

School phone use is common, and policies are inconsistent. During school hours almost all of the pre-teen and teenage participants in our [Constant Companion study](#) used their phones at least once, for a median of 43 minutes. But they also reported that policies about phone use in schools vary—some- times even from classroom to classroom—and aren't always enforced. As we describe in the report:

“School phone policies varied widely among the adolescents we talked to. For example, some youth advisors described having a total ban on smartphones in their high schools, with detentions resulting if students used their phone. In other schools, youth advisors described having policies that ranged from no restrictions or class-specific rules, including teachers encouraging use during class (e.g., to look something up or participate in class discussions), allowing students to use phones once they completed in-class assignments, and generally allowing smartphone access between periods. Some youth advisors' teachers used strategies such as having students put their phone in a bag at the front of class, to avoid it being a distraction. School policies also varied by the age of students, with the high school age youth advisors reflecting back on stricter rules in middle school. “

[Media Balance and Well-Being](#) is a core concept of our [Digital Citizenship Curriculum](#), developed with Harvard’s Project Zero, and transcreated & translated for the [UK](#) (into British English and Welsh) in 2020. Our Digital Citizenship resources provided the framework for Education For a Connected World and are used by 1.2 million educators globally.

Through our parent platform [Common Sense Media](#), we provide [independent and essential guidance for parents](#) on getting the most from children’s screen time, for example, our [Family Tech Planners](#) are a great way for kids to have a shared understanding of how your family makes the most out of entertainment and tech time. See also our parent guides such as [How to Help Kids Balance Phones and Screens with Sleep](#).

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